

What is polypharmacy?

Polypharmacy means taking many medicines. Older adults or people with long-term (chronic) diseases often need to do this. People may take many medicines to manage health problems and improve their health.

However, there are potential risks involved when you take a lot of medicines:

- One medicine may cause problems if you take it with another medicine. A medicine also can cause problems if you have certain health problems, or it can react to certain things you eat or drink. These are all called medicine interactions.
- Side effects are more likely.
- You may find it hard to keep track of and take the medicines as instructed.

Who is likely to have problems?

Older adults and people with long-term health problems often take many types of medicines. They also may take natural health products, such as vitamins, minerals and herbs. The more medicines you take, the more likely problems are.

Bodies of older adults may be more sensitive to medicines, which can also cause problems.

What is a medicine interaction?

The biggest danger when you take many medicines is an interaction. Taking one medicine could:

- Make another medicine stronger or weaker. For instance, a blood thinner makes bleeding more likely. If you also take aspirin, you make bleeding even more likely, meaning taking both at the same time could be harmful.
- Cause side effects that create problems with other medicines. For instance, a medicine you take to control your urine may affect one you take for dementia.
- Make another health problem worse. For instance, a medicine you use for a cold could make high blood pressure worse.
- Make some common problems worse. This happens most often in older adults. Medicines can make you fall, feel dizzy, confused, have trouble sleeping or feel depressed.

Interactions can happen with:

- Prescription medicines.
- Over-the-counter (OTC) medicines.
- Natural health products (vitamins, minerals and herbs).
- Foods and drinks.

What can you do to make problems less likely?

- Make a list of all the prescription and over-the-counter medicines you take. Include everything you take, even natural health products. Take the list to each doctor or hospital visit. Ask your doctor if there are any things on your list that you do not need, or if there are things you should not take. Anytime you see a doctor, show him or her your list of medicines.
- Give your pharmacist your list of medicines before you pick up any new ones. Ask about interactions with any other medicines you take. If you go to more than one drugstore, make sure each of them has your list.
- Ask your doctor or pharmacist to run your list through a drug interaction checker. This is a computer database that checks for medicines that can cause problems with others. If you find a problem, talk to your doctor.
- Do not start taking any new medicines, natural health products or over-the-counter medicines without talking to your doctor first.
- Know your medicines by name, understand what they do, and know how to take each one. Read all the information sheets that come with your medicines. You can use the Internet or find books that list the side effects and interactions of medicines.
- Ask your doctor what side effects to expect. Learn what to do if you have one and keep track of any symptoms or changes in how you feel.
- Take your medicines exactly as prescribed. Call your doctor or nurse call line if you think you are having a problem with your medicine.

For 24/7 nurse advice and general health information, call Health Link at 811.

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Author: [Healthwise Staff](http://www.healthwise.org) (www.healthwise.org)

Medical Review: Adam Husney, MD — Family Medicine